

CHAPTER IV.

Quienes dice usted que son los que estaban aqui ?

MORATIN.

THE sun was down before they had reached the brink of the precipitous and thickly wooded banks, overhanging the smaller river. Here they were met by the active Hamish, who, with an expression of countenance that told them his errand had sped, 'said something in Gaelic to his master.

“All is right, I see,” said Macgillivray; “then lead us to the ford.”

The gilly laid hold of his master's bridle, and led his horse forward along the edge of the bank, Amherst and his servant following, until they came to a little ravine, through which a small rill found its way to the river. Into this dark hollow the lad dived through the brushwood, where the boughs hung so low, as to force them to

extend themselves backwards at length upon their horses.

Upon reaching the margin of the river, they found themselves just above the commencement of a boisterous stream, and at the lower end of a long deep and black pool, stretching far up between the high wooded precipices. At this place, the opposite bank became suddenly low, sinking into a meadow, or what is called in Scotland a haugh. The intervening river presented a most unpromising ford, being full of large round stones. Macgillivray begged Amherst to wait until he should first try the passage. Hamish entered, the water rising nearly to his middle, and guiding himself by feeling with the rung in his right hand, he with the other half dragged and half supported the floundering animal his master rode, its feet stumbling and slipping over the rounded and polished fragments of granite in the bottom, so that the atmosphere of water he raised by splashing hid both himself and his rider from their view. Macgillivray was no sooner in safety on the grass of the farther bank than Hamish returned for Amherst, and afterwards for O'Gollochar, whose horses he successively led over in the same way.

They now found themselves in a piece of pasture of considerable extent, having a conical hill rising from one extremity of it, whence some lofty wooded steeps bent irregularly round it towards the river, where they terminated in a bold crag hanging over the stream, about two hundred yards above its junction with the larger river, and dividing it off from its deep bed. The flat top of this crag was covered with pines of the most picturesque form and gigantic growth, and although its face overhung the stream too precipitously to admit of the growth of any thing there but a few tortuous stems, and scattered shrub-like plants, the side fronting the haugh was every where thickly covered with hard grown deciduous trees. Those growing at the bottom shot up to an immense height, being fostered by the perfect shelter of the spot, and by the deep soil into which they had thrust their roots. The stems of these sylvan giants, however, were hid by an apparently impenetrable thicket of birch, alder, hazle, black thorn, and holly, growing for a considerable breadth about the edges of the wild pasture.

To the surprise of Amherst, the thicket under the great rock seemed to be on fire, at least he

could not conceive how the flames and sparks, bickering up within it, could have existed without the conflagration of the whole. The gilly led the way across the haugh towards it, and, as they advanced, their ears were saluted by the lowing of cattle, none of which, however, were visible.

They had no sooner reached the edge of the thicket, than Macgillivray dismounted, begging of Amherst to do the same, and each leading his horse, they proceeded to follow the gilly through an almost imperceptible path, that wound under the intertwined branches, until their farther progress was arrested by a rugged, but formidable barrier, constructed with long crooked stakes, of unbarked knaggy pieces of oak, thrust deep into the ground, and crossing each other diagonally like a close wattle, the whole being united above with the living boughs of the bushes. Through this, which at first appeared to be impervious, they found a passage by a rude gate, made of similar materials. This was sentinelled by a tall raw-boned Highlander, carrying a long gun. The man bent with a submissive air, and saluted Macgillivray in Gaelic, as he admitted them within the barrier, where, among the bushes of

the thicket, here less densely set, they found a large drove of cattle resting, the ground everywhere exhibiting traces of being much trodden by their hooves. Here they relinquished their horses to the care of the gilly, and having proceeded some yards farther, not without considerable risk of tumbling over the recumbent oxen, they reached a second barrier of less substantial materials than the first, though similarly constructed. Through this they were admitted by a small wicket, opened to them as before by an armed Highlander.

They now breathed a freer air, the brushwood having ceased, and the leafy vault overhead being reared higher, on the tall upright stems of those trees growing near the base of the rock, which stood as close to each other as the ground could bear them, resembling the columns of some ancient temple.

Amherst now perceived that they were opposite to the mouth of a cavern or grotto, partly natural, and partly artificial. A projecting ledge of the rock, covering a large area underneath it, had been built up in front, with a thick wall composed of sods and stones, so as to be entirely shut

in, leaving only a low door-way for entrance. A large fire was burning before it, and a number of rough terriers, and enormous wire-haired greyhounds of the Highland breed, starting up from their slumbers around it, began to assail them, but were soon reduced to quietness by the blows and clamorous execrations of five or six Highlanders, who were engaged in supplying the fire with dry fuel, and attending to the unpolished cookery of the fragments of two sheep, which, from the recent skins hanging on the trees, seemed to have been just slaughtered. Part of the flesh was seething in a large pot, hanging over the fire, from three rugged sticks set on end, whilst green branches were preparing to broil the remainder on.

The interior of the grotto, to which they now advanced, was lighted up with large torches of bog-fir, yielding a pure and brilliant flame. At the entrance, they were met by a thin active looking little man, of middle age, in the Highland dress, with sandy hair, and a pale countenance, but with eyes glancing with a peculiar intelligence, curiously blended with an air of sharpness, courage, and cunning.

“ Mr Macrory,” said Macgillivray, as he stretched out his hand to him, “ you see I have kept tryst, and have brought a friend with me also to partake of the good cheer I see you are preparing for us.”

“ Lochandhu,” said the other, “ I am glad to see you. I was beginning to think lang for you. —Sir,” said he to Amherst, as he proffered him a horny hand he saw it was expected he should accept, “ I am glad to see you. Any friend of Lochandhu’s will be heartily welcome to such fare as I can gie. Pray, walk in, gentlemen.”

Then calling to some of his people, he desired them in Gaelic to place fresh bundles of ferns for the gentlemen, which they very speedily did, tying them up so firmly, as to convert them into very pleasant seats. This was the first time Amherst had ever heard Mr Macgillivray called by the name of his estate, by which, however, he shall in future be designated, such being the universal Highland practice, where the numbers of a clan render this mode of distinction absolutely necessary.

The floor of the grotto was covered a foot or two deep with fresh gathered ferns, and a number

of small kegs, with two or three awkward looking saddles, were strewed about, whilst five or six long barrell'd fowling-pieces, and one or two broad-swords, were resting against the wall. As this was all the furniture it contained, Amherst suspected that it was only a temporary place of residence. It was extremely dry and comfortable, however; the heat of the fire without, penetrated into its innermost recesses, whilst the fir-torches, stuck horizontally into the crevices of the rock, made the interior as light as day. Amherst's curiosity was much excited to know what were the habits and profession of their host, but as he saw he could not question Lochandhu, without the risk of giving offence to Macrory, he suppressed his wishes for the present.

They were no sooner seated, than he who did the honours of this strange place, speaking to one of the men in Gaelic, the fellow went to one of the kegs, and drawing a spigot, caught the liquor in a small flat silver cup, having two thin slips attached to the edge to hold it by. It was capable of containing about as much as three ordinary glasses. This he presented full to Macrory, who drank it off to the health of his guests.

It was then again filled and presented to Lochandhu, who emptied it in the same way. When it came to Amherst's turn, he drank to them, and tasting the liquor, and finding it brandy, he was about to return it to the cup-bearer. But a significant look from Lochandhu informed him that etiquette required he should finish the pledge, and, accordingly, making up his mind to submit to the customs of those with whom he now found himself, he drained it to the bottom.

“ And when left ye Sir Alisander's, gentlemen, if I may ask ?” said Macrory, after this prelude to conversation had been gone through ; “ I thought ye would ha'e been here lang afore this.”

“ Why, truly,” said Lochandhu, “ the knight is hospitable, and we got not so early off as I generally travel, nor did we much hurry ourselves by the way. Besides, I thought it was well that you should be fairly lodged before we joined you.”

“ It was as well,” replied the other, looking askance at Lochandhu. “ The beasts, as you may believe, were made to put down their cloots, and were not very long on the road ; but some o' them got awa' frae us as we came down into the glen,

and it was a while before we caught them again ; and then we were sic a weary time o' getting them through the fuird, that we were not that lang here afore ye."

" You seem to have made a very good market of it," said Lochandhu.

" Aye, aye—no that ill—no that ill—a' things considered ; I seldom fail after my plans are aince weel laid. But saw ye ony body on the scent, as ye came alang ?—Saw ye nae body looking after us ?"

Here Lochandhu, suddenly glancing a particular look at him, and starting up and interrupting him, expressed his surprise that there was no appearance of supper, and began calling loudly in Gaelic to the men at the fire, as if to expedite their operations.

" Aye, aye," said he, after hearing their reply, " it is of no use to hurry them. Well, since it will be yet some time before the feast is prepared, I must ask you, Mr Macrory, to take a step to the door with me, as I have some little business to talk to you about. Mr Oakenwold," continued he, bowing to Amherst, " will, I am sure, have the goodness to pardon me for leaving him to his own meditations, which, to a hungry man, cannot be

very agreeable ; but my business is not long. I wish, Sir," added he, laughing, " I had a library to offer to you here ; but you see," pointing his hand round the wall, " we have neither books nor paintings to amuse you."

Amherst begged him to make no apology,—they walked out together,—and he observed them pacing along between the large stems, under the shade of the trees, at some distance beyond the fire, where its red glare penetrated sufficiently to show him that they were in very earnest conversation.

Amherst, when thus left to his own thoughts, naturally enough turned them upon the whimsical situation he now found himself in, sitting thus in a cavern of the rock, so much resembling a den of thieves, with a parcel of wild Highlanders lying round a huge fire at the entrance of it, their hands bloody from the butchering to which they had been lately applied, engaged in the operation of broiling large mishapen fragments of flesh upon the green branches, placed over red hot embers, and their countenances appearing doubly ferocious from the strong effect of light thrown on them. A little further reflection led him to be not alto-

gether satisfied with the character of Lochandhu, and he could not help thinking that he had been perhaps a little precipitate, in thus wantonly trusting himself to the conduct of one, of whom he had previously known so little. But, then, why should he doubt the character of a man who was so well received at the table of Sir Alisander Sanderson? And what possible object could he have in leading him into danger?

As he again looked out, he saw that O'Gollochar had mingled with the group at the fire. He recollected that his servant had been absent in the morning, and, suspecting he had been at Eaglesholme, he called him, in the hopes of hearing something of Miss Malcolm.

“Och! I hope your honour is not angry at me,” said O'Gollochar, with a ludicrous look of apprehension.—“Sure, then, to tell your honour the truth, I just borrowed Mr Brouster's sorrel nag, Draff, and took a little walk over to Aiglesholme—your honour knows it would not have been daicent to have gone away without seeing Miss Aipindle—so I canters away as hard as ould Draff could go, and, after tying him among the rees, I goes up to the gate to the ould porter, and says

I, Mr Torr, I will be mainly obligated to ye, if ye will just go and give my compliments to Miss Aipindle, and tell her I wants to spake three words to her. But do ye think the ould bull-dog would stir?—Och ! divil a foot—and he shook his head gruffly, as much as to say, you may go and be ——. But as good luck would have it, just as I didn't know what to be after doing—who comes tripping towards the gate, like any bird, but Miss Aipindle herself. Och ! swate blessings on ye my dear, says I ; but faith she was but a melancholy bird after all ; for what with her own thoughts of leaving me, and what with the sad news she had to tell of her lady, I'm sure we both cried like a couple of nightengales.”

“ Good Heavens ! to what sad news of Miss Malcolm do you allude ? ” said Amherst, with an anxiety and agitation that made him for the moment forget all care of concealment.

“ Och ! nought at all, dear master, ” replied O'Gollochar, alarmed by the earnestness of his manner. “ Only she tould me her young lady had been crying her eyes out, all along of your going away. Her uncle and she, it seems, had been closeted up together for two or three hours

last night, when, all of a sudden, the bell was furiously rung, and when Miss Aipindle went up, she found the ould Lord in a great flustrification, and Miss Malcolm in a dead faint. She was immediately carried to bed, and brought to herself after some time. But she did nothing all night but cry; and Madame Bossanfield was in so terrible a taking about her, that she sat up by her bedside till morning, trying to comfort her, but the not a comfort, nor comfort, would she take at all at all, poor soul!"

Amherst's misery received a deep accession from this intelligence. He groaned inwardly; yet exerting himself to the utmost to conceal his agitation, he put a thousand questions to his servant. But he could learn no more; for, after a short interview, Epingle had been suddenly called up to her mistress, and the parting, though so tender as to wring not a few tears from O'Gollochar's eyes at the very recollection of it, had been so hasty as hardly to leave him time to say another word.

Amherst almost regretted that he had been induced so easily to quit one, whose heart was so entirely devoted to him. He almost repented

that he had not taken Cleaver's advice, and made an attempt to rescue her from what he could not help thinking tyranny. He easily worked himself into the belief, that, if Lord Eaglesholme should still persist in opposing his wishes, and those of his niece, he should be justified in taking any means to relieve her from such oppression.

As he was in the midst of such reflections as these, Lochandhu and Macrory entered, and put an end to them for the present.

“ I am glad to have it in my power to announce supper, Mr Oakenwold,” said Lochandhu gaily. “ The grand sewer is about to bring in the golden goblets, and many a dainty dish of rarest price. But, joking apart, I wish you may be able to partake of this our sylvan fare. To the stomach of a bare-legged Scotchman, who has been trudging the mosses and moors all day, it is indeed exquisitely palatable; but to you, who have been bred in the very lap of luxurious civilization, I fear our food will taste but coarse and homely.”

Amherst assured him he was by no means very delicate in general, though at present he had not in reality much appetite.

“ Well, well,” said Lochandhu, “ I hope the

novelty of the supper, as well as of the supper-room, may have the effect of making a young man enjoy both. I remember, when I was a lad, I used to prefer lying in the heather all night, let the weather be what it might, to the softest and warmest bed in my father's house. But although I don't fear doing so even now, when occasion requires it, the glory and the novelty of the feat have lost their relish for me.—But here comes the smoking cogue !”

As he said this, one of the Highlanders entered, bearing a broad deep vessel, constructed of staves and hoops, full of smoking hot broth of a very substantial description, being made of great quantities of mutton boiled down to rags, and thickened with oatmeal and shredded onions. This was propped up on some bunches of ferns, and the gentlemen and Macrory drew their fern cushions around it. A deep wooden bowl, and a horn spoon, was handed to each of them, and they began to help themselves from the cogue, that threw up fresh steams every time it was stirred, like the partial eruptions of a half extinguished volcano. Amherst, although he did not much admire the appearance of this dish, imitated the

others, and helped himself to some of its contents; nor did he find it altogether so unpalatable as he had anticipated.

This *entrée* was followed by another of similar shape and size, heaped up with hissing fragments of broiled mutton, sending forth a very savoury steam, and a knife and fork, drawn from a dirk-case, were handed to Amherst, together with some hot oaten cakes, baked on a flat stone, and toasted before the fire. The viands were by no means uninviting, and although Amherst's sickness of heart had robbed him of his appetite, the other two did not fail to do ample justice to them, ever and anon washing the morsels of food down with a tasse of brandy.

When they had finished their meal, the cogues were carried out to the fire, where O'Gollochar and the Highlanders speedily cleared them out, assisted by the dogs, who stood by, and alertly caught up the offals, both cooked and raw, which were thrown to them. Nor was brandy wanting at this second table, being drank from small wooden queaghs, made with narrow staves of different-coloured woods nicely hooped together. The liquor went frequently round; but, although

a great deal was drunk by each individual, there did not appear the slightest approach to intoxication.

The conversation within the grotto during the meal, and during the short time after it, employed in sipping brandy, chiefly turned on the subject of deer-stalking, and the chase of different animals, objects of sport to the Highlanders. Lochandhu and Macrory each narrated various anecdotes relating to such toils, and told of many a feat they had personally performed. At length all rattling of horn-spoons, and crunching of jaws, having ceased in the neighbourhood of the fire, Macrory called to his people, who brought in large additional bundles of dry fern, and made up three very luxurious beds, and Amherst, glad to be permitted to retire into the society of his own thoughts, however gloomy, immediately wrapped himself up in his cloak, and took possession of one of them, Lochandhu and Macrory soon afterwards following his example.

The lights in the grotto were then extinguished; a watch was set to keep up the fire; O'Gollochiar threw himself on the ground near his master; and such of the Highlanders who were

not on duty as sentinels, disposed of themselves, each according to his own fancy, forming a sort of group just within the entrance.

Amherst lay for some time awake. All was still, save only the muffled sound of the rushing river, and the deep breathing of the sleepers around him; or the drowsy tapping of the man stationed at the fire, as he poked together and arranged the half burned fragments of wood, with the end of a stake; or the smothered growl, or half uttered whine of the dogs, as they urged the fancied chace in dreams. At last he also yielded to the gentle influence, and, fatigued by his mental sufferings, his want of rest the night before, and the exercise he had undergone during the day, he dropt by degrees into profound oblivion.